THE BLOOD OF THE FEMALE MARTYRS AS THE SPERM OF THE EARLY CHURCH[1]

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Abstract

To what extent did early Christian martyr stories function as empowering the female body and contributing to an independent view of her 'self' and 'identity'? In the light of claims made, often motivated by political correctness, that certain early Christian traditions acknowledged, appreciated and promoted woman's agency in Graeco-Roman social interaction, it is argued that if the notion of a 'regulatory body' is taken into consideration, early Christian female bodies and identities were crushed both by the Roman Imperium and early Christian patriarchal leadership.

1. Introduction

Concluding his *Apologeticus*, Tertullian challenged the Roman authorities by imbuing suffering with power. He picked up on the topic of voluntary martyrdom, comparing it with the battle of the soldier, then with important figures from the histories of the Greeks and Romans before returning to martyrdom among Christians. In all these examples, bodies that must have suffered inexpressible pain were restored to a position of power and status. It is then in this context that he challenged the Roman authorities: 'The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow: the blood of Christians is seed' (Tertullianus, *Apol* 50).

We know that when this statement was made, several female and male martyrs had been tortured and killed. It is a moot question, however, to what extent female martyrs featured in Tertullian's mind when this statement was made. Did he assign the same generative power to the blood of female martyrs? Many contemporary Christian apologists would probably answer with a resounding 'yes' and point out that just a few sentences earlier Tertullian had referred to a Christian woman who had been condemned to have sexual intercourse with a pimp. According to

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him she would rather have been slaughtered by a lion than suffer the indignity of impurity. And it would be possible to refer to Tertullian's *Ad Martyras* where he very explicitly indicated that not only men, but women too have not only calmly endured, but eagerly desired the painful torturings of martyrdom (Tertullianus, *Mart* 4). When he again refers to the notables of Graeco-Roman histories, women are also included. Dido defied the flames, to avoid another marriage after the death of her husband. When Scipio destroyed Carthage, the wife of Hasdrubal rushed into the fire with her children to avoid increasing his public humiliation. 'Woman', said Tertullian, 'has voluntarily sought the wild beasts, and even asps, those serpents worse than bear or bull, which Cleopatra applied to herself, that she might not fall into the hands of her enemy' (*Mart* 4). In both the *Ad Martyras* and the *Apologeticus*, the Athenian prostitute, who participated in a conspiracy against the tyrant, eventually, after having been tortured and to prevent herself from betraying her conspirators bit off her tongue and spat it in the face of her executioner.

Joining the circle of contemporary Christian apologists, Hoffman (1995:168) tells us that Tertullian 'greatly admired real contemporary women by his unqualified praise of Christian woman martyrs'. According to him, Tertullian must have known about the persecution of the Scilli martyrs and was definitely acquainted with the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas (1995:169). He also argues that Tertullian did not exclude women from the ability to be martyred, that is, from having the bodily potential to endure torture. From Tertullian's reference to female martyrs in *Ad Martyras*, he infers that women were not regarded as 'inferior to men', because Tertullian would have referred condescendingly to their inability to endure hardship or pain. This he substantiates with a quotation from *De Cultu Feminarum* which reads: 'Wherefore, blessed [sisters], let us meditate on hardship, and we shall not feel them; let us abandon luxuries, and we shall not regret them. Let us stand ready to endure violence, having nothing which we fear to leave behind' (Hoffman 1995: 170). But Hoffman forgets to tell us that this exhortation functions in a context where Tertullian prescribed[2] that a departure should be made from what were commonly regarded as typical female features. Instead of assuming their ability to endure martyrdom, he assumed exactly the opposite and for that reason directed them to conform to a particular type of body because he suspected that they (owing to his stereotypical disposition) would have difficulty doing that. There is actually something really gruesome in the manner in which he ridiculed the ornamental adornment of early Christian women, when he sarcastically states:

> Otherwise, I do not really know whether a hand, used to be surrounded by a bracelet would sustain to be struck with the hardness of the chain; I do not know whether a leg, which delighted in an ankleband, would endure to be bound in a leatherband; I fear that a neck, besieged by strings of pearls and emeralds, would not offer a place for the sword.[3]

Hoffman is certainly correct that Tertullian referred to female Christian martyrs; he may even have admired them, but he is incorrect, biased and selective in claiming an ideology of equality for Tertullian.

It would even be possible to find in the well-known formulation by Tertullian, that is, 'the blood of Christians is the seed', that the blood of female martyrs is not excluded, although we moderns, suspect that semen is usually associated with males! For Tertullian it would not have been a problem to associate the female reproductive system with sperm ... and yet it is probably more correct to use the more neutral sperm, or semen, than 'seed'. That the female body produced semen was fairly widely acknowledged in the Graeco-Roman world, and for that reason it would probably not have been a problem to see female blood associated with sperm. But what would have been a problem was to associate female sperm with generative power, with the potential to provide growth and development. It could be argued, on the other hand, that the bodies of women were regarded as being particularly suited to growth and development, and one could cite agricultural metaphors, where the female body is usually equated with the soil. However, even when these metaphors were used, they were not used to express what provides life, but what cultivates and protects life, a space within which the product of male generative power may grow and develop. Although Tertullian explicitly also referred to female martyrs in this very context, their bodies would have needed to change, their blood would have required a transformation into a different quality before it could have incorporated generative power.

The basic concern of this article, is whether the role of female martyrship catapulted women into an elevated status, legitimating contemporary scholarly references to an emergence of gender equality in the Graeco-Roman world. I want to argue that although women may have been included in references to martyrs, although they may have been used as examples, as role models, the key word is 'used'; the occurrence of reports about them does not validate any claim to equality for women, and these reports should not be taken as traces of a development towards greater independence, greater freedom and more power for women in

Antiquity. In our desire to allow for the emergence of women as agents in Antiquity, specifically in early Christianity, there is a tendency to impose our notions of democracy and equality onto the social interactions of Antiquity and the problem is enhanced not only by a selective reading of the texts but also by an objectivistic one as if the occurrence of a reference to female agency in Antiquity immediately legitimises the social reality of gender equality. There is a need to understand the bodies of female martyrs within what we can infer from Butler (1993) as the 'regulatory body' and from Foucault (1977:26) as a political technology of the body. Once we see female bodies from this perspective, references to them serve a rhetorics of male empowerment and the emergence of early Christianity did not change or modify this engendered onslaught, but re-affirmed and entrenched Graeco-Roman values of gender.

2. *A Political Technology of the Body*

2.1 The Making of the 'Regulatory Body'

Butler (1993:1) tells us that 'sexual difference ... is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices'; yet this does not mean that 'discourse causes sexual difference. The category of 'sex' is, from the start, normative: it is what Butler (1993:1) has called a 'regulatory' ideal. In another context, Foucault (1985:25–32) refers us to a prescriptive moral code which must be distinguished from the individual, idiosyncratic conduct of human bodies. The concern here is with a world of multi-layered discourses, configurations of meaning that may function as a generative principle, but regulate the formation of bodies. It is a symbolically structured context that does not give birth to bodies, does not cause sexual difference, does not make bodies develop and grow, and yet it forms bodies, manufactures and womanufactures bodies. From these multi-layered discourses the 'regulatory body' is born as a type that is not only a social product, but simultaneously functions as regulating the formation and production of bodies.

The regulatory body is a site upon which political meaning is inscribed. As such it is a not only product of political meaning, but also enforces and entrenches certain politicalities. It is a product of political power, but its 'regulatory force is [also] made clear as a kind of productive

power, the power to produce, demarcate, circulate, differentiate' (Butler 1993:1). There is therefore a dynamics of political power that forms, infuses and pervades the bodies it controls. The body that it structured, serves again to structure bodies. Early Christian martyrdom has to be seen within this dynamics of political power.

To situate the body of the female martyr in a political technology of the body, we need to briefly refer to the way in which Graeco-Roman society inscribed its hierarchies upon human bodies. The discursive practices forming the regulatory body in Graeco-Roman society inscribed upon the body a politics of reputation, gender and spatialisation (Stewart 1997:8). The body of the freeborn, adult, Graeco-Roman male determined the hierarchies in which animals, barbarians, slaves, and females were located. Male superiority functioned as principle for the construction of the regulatory body. Foxhall (1998:5) writes that 'in classical antiquity, it is clear that the possession of an identifiable male body to a large extent negated the effects of a chosen social role in the overall gender hierarchies, placing him still superior to all women. Roman men were identified as men by being born with male bodies, carrying male genitals, and despite any subsequent social and physical events, his maleness [and with it his hierarchical position] usually remained intact.' Formed by the hierarchically superior elements of the macrocosm, the primary characteristic with which the male body could identify was seen to be heat.

The female body, on the other hand, was seen as inferior to the male; its incompleteness and inferiority were based on the simple fact of 'not being male'. As a body, it was also a microcosm of the macrocosm, but its distinguishing feature was its moistness, and this moistness constituted a different type of bodily flesh; hers was spongy, moist and soft; it was only an approximation of the male body; a hierarchically different version of the male. Her moistness provided her with breasts, curves, but also with too much blood and emotion.

A whole set of hierarchically arranged dichotomies distinguished male from female within what Laquer (1990) has called a 'one-sex' model. Masculinity was associated with heat; feminity with coldness, man with dryness, woman with moisture; the male with activity, the female with passivity; the body of the male was impenetrable, the female penetrable, male closed, female opened and exposed, penetrator versus penetrated; hardness versus softness. Bodily qualities translated into virtues and into spatial allocation. Males were associated with control and stability, females with not being in control and instability; males with honesty,

females with deception; males with courage, females with restraint.

The inferiority of every female was therefore inscribed upon her body as she was seen in terms of the male; females carried it as part of their bodies, as innate and inherent in the very flesh and blood they were. They were objects to be controlled, especially because their bodies apparently made them prone to uncontrollable, emotional behaviour. Aggression, violence and humiliation played no minor role in the controlling activity and were seen to be correct. Not being male meant to be worthless, valueless and available to the use and abuse of males.[4]

2.2 The Rise of The Imperial Cult and Forming The 'Regulatory Body'

In a hierarchy of bodies, the emperor was on the other end of the scale; here was not only male, but *the male*. Part of a political technology of the body that was forcefully exerted upon the bodies of the early Christian martyrs was the emergence and development of the imperial cult. To ensure the stability of the empire and in a effort to consolidate the loyalties of widespread communities and regions, the Julio-Claudian Caesars gradually allowed the development of the imperial cult (Fajra 1994:7–10). Stability and consolidation were not the only motivations; the emergence of the imperial cult ensured an almost primordial position of power for the Caesars. It was precisely this absolute position of power that initially cautioned the Senate in Rome to grant the status of gods to the emperors, but owing to Augustus' careful diplomacy a decree of the Senate declared him *divus Augustus* and recommended that he be honoured with the other state divinities. Although this deification took place only after the emperor had died and although it was the Senate that had to decide on and bestow *apotheosis* and although *apotheosis* initially drew boundaries between the Roman elite and the populace, the power and status of the Senate gradually declined as the status of the emperor increased (cf also Garnsey 1968; Price 1987, specifically 82–99; Barton 1990:9; Kreitzer 1990).

In the provinces the imperial cult was more readily accepted and after the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE it had already been embraced with enthusiasm. Greek cities initiated the imperial cult from 29 BCE and the Roman provinces of Bythania and Asia established cults with temples, priests and games (Fischler 1998:165). The masculinity and virility of the emperor occupied center position within the imperial cult. According

to Fischler (1998:167, 169, 179) he was the 'ultimate partriarchal figure', the 'outstanding male authority figure' endowed with all the characteristics of absolute masculinity, such as 'military dominant', 'benevolent' and the 'supreme benefactor'. However, deification also pertained to imperial women, especially in Asia and Greece. The motivation for the deification of imperial women was not an attempt at equality for women, or a sharing of power, but their inclusion in the imperial cult served to enhance the image of the emperor as patriarch and father of all the cities.

It is in the person of the emperor made *divus* that the 'regulatory body' acquired its quite visible bodily manifestation. The person of the emperor embodied all the powerful virile characteristics that could function as the generative principle for the making of appropriate, 'wanted' bodies in the Roman Empire. Incorporated into the 'regulatory body' was the imperial family, who symbolized continuity with the past and the future and the stability of a household controlled by a supreme *paterfamilias*.

Replacement of the emperor as 'regulatory body' and the construction of competitive possibilities could only have been regarded as offensive. In a similar manner, disregard of household structure would not only be threat to social order, but also an insult to the stability enforced by the supreme *paterfamilias*.

Although it is difficult to establish the precise scope of the *crimen laesae maiestatis* owing to its varied development, this seems to be the crime of which the early Christians martyrs have been accused of. Not to honour the emperor was seen as an insult to him and since he was seen as defender, benefactor and protector of the empire, a disregard of his status meant a threat to the welfare of the community. Unwillingness to sacrifice to the emperor and to acknowledge the traditional deities, refusal to deny Christ as king and disruption of household obligations would all have been seen as criminal offences and associated with treason.

2.3 The Spectacle

How do you ensure the untouchability of the 'regulatory body', the sacrosanct nature of a community's bodily constructions? How do you ensure that the dignity of the emperor's person, his divine status and perfect masculinity remain entrenched and are reinforced after having been questioned? How do you establish solidarity and stability within a community when the ultimate values serving these objectives have been

challenged? How do you produce bodies modelled on the 'regulatory body'?

The games, the 'spectacle' and the sites of the arena and amphitheatre functioned as a mechanism where in realistic dramatic manner the masses could gaze upon an inverted marking of the regulatory body upon the bodies of the participants in the spectacle. Perhaps no other ceremony could demonstrate so visually how brutal power relations invested themselves on the body, reinforcing the regulatory body, through the destruction of irregulatory bodies, powerless bodies, worthless bodies. Distanced from the bodies of prisoners of war, slaves, criminals, soldiers and gladiators, spectators were reminded of how a body should be by the demonstration of what happens to resisting bodies.

The 'spectacle' enacted in the amphitheatre offered several possibilities. First, it offered public space where the masses could get together. To a certain extent it offered a space where the social body could be represented. This was the one public space where all levels of society could gather, in full view of another and, bound together by the activities happening in front of them. This was also the one event, that might be attended by the emperor, and even if he did not attend his representatives of high standing or the Roman aristocracy would function as celebrities. It was the ideal opportunity to demonstrate solidarity and stability, and the divide between 'us' and 'them' was architecturally designed in the distance between the open area, where the unfortunate 'them' had to perform, and ascending tiers, where the 'us' could gaze upon them.

Second, the spectacle was in some way associated with emperor worship. Shows differed in type and size, but the largest ones were associated with emperor worship (Hopkins 1983:13). Since the emperor and the crowd often assembled at shows in Rome, the crowd could display their dissatisfaction over certain issues of state (Hopkins 1983:15), and several incidents were reported where interaction between emperor and crowd did not run smoothly. However, the scale of balance was always in favour of the emperor. Not only did the donors of successive spectacles compete to bestow the greatest honour upon him, but his power over life and death confirmed that 'he was Caesar Imperator, the Foremost of Men' (Hopkins 1985:16).

Third, every time a spectacle was held, the hierarchies of the social body were enacted and entrenched. The architectural structure reflected these hierarchies. Enclosed by two walls *(baltei)* the first set of tiers formed the *podium*, where the emperor, the senators, Vestal virgins, certain priests and senior magistrates sat. The next sets of tiers were called *maenianum*

and were occupied by knights (first *maenianum*), tribunes and citizens (second *maenianum*) and in the third only the poor and women were accommodated. Just as the prominence and power of the emperor and the aristocracy were confirmed, women were re-affirmed as being on the edges of society, close to complete displacement.[5]

Fourth, the spectacle offered the possibility for public punishment and execution. Here was a moment when the social body could 'write' in detail on bodies what type of body they desired as the ideal. Foucault (1977) has made us aware how punishment in public led to the creation of a whole technology that was enacted upon the body, demonstrating visibly the investment of power relations on it. Unlike modern punitive practice, which is usually concealed and minimalises pain, concentrating more on rehabilitation and correction, public punishment intends to inflict maximal pain for as long as the body can endure it. As such, it gives rise to a macabre technology of torture. Measuring becomes a component of punishment; how many whiplashes before the body is destroyed. How long before a person is suffocated by strangling? Where is the exact spot to which the final blow has to be delivered and how can I avoid it if more time should be spent on the infliction of pain and suffering?

The development of such a technology appeared in many forms in the spectacle. A possible example was the *familia gladiatoria*, in which not only different types of gladiators could be distinguished, but also different schools (Junkelmann 2000:35–38, 45–64). Each of these categories was equipped with its own types of weapons and the career of each gladiator was carefully recorded. Training even extended to the act of how to die. Although the ranks of gladiators were initially occupied only by condemned prisoners and prisoners of war, they gradually included volunteers (Barton 1989:25). Another possible example was the manner in which the spectacles allowed for mythological dramatisation and for the re-enactment of historical battles (cf Coleman 1990:67–69). The intention was a deliberate maintenance of an atmosphere of violence because of a belief that violence created valour (Hopkins 1983:2). As these battles could be seen as extensions of triumphal, imperial processions, major casualities were the objective (Coleman 1990:71). The spectacle offered a space where the ideal body could increase in immense power via the destruction of any type of body subjected to a carefully planned and implemented technology.

2.4 Roman Punitive Practice and The Punishment of Early Christian Female Martyrs as Agency in The Enactment of The 'Regulatory Body'

Although the grounds on the basis of which early Christians were condemned and tortured to death are not always clear, resistance to the imperial cult must have played an important role. Trajan's response to Pliny the younger shows that resistance to the imperial cult was regarded as a culpable crime, despite the reluctance of the Roman authorities to prohibit the cult and to hunt down Christians (cf Plinius, *Ep Tra* 10.96–97). Bisbee (1988:99) correctly summarises: 'The fact is that no matter how much the apologists denied it, the martyr mentality was often guilty of treason, for it regarded the Empire as Satan's puppet, and accordingly many of the Christians actively sought to tear it down, even if it meant throwing themselves headlong into the machinery of the empire' (cf also Gustafson 1997:88). With female martyrs there was often the added accusation of threatening the social body by abstaining from sexual activity and opting for celibacy. Since the value of the female body was measured in terms of its reproductivity, that is, a container, necessary only for conception and nurturing, refusing the assigned social female role meant resistance to the regulatory body and was seen as a crime.

The imperium reacted and since the emperor's honour was at stake, the most intense forms of torture would be applicable, because in the humiliation, and systematic destruction of the condemned person's body the greatness of Imperial Rome was advertised. Although several motives for punishment can be identified in the Roman penal system (Coleman 1990:45–49), two are applicable: retribution or revenge, which was enacted by means of an exaggerated *talio* principle; and humiliation. The assumption was that the criminal had earned his or her sentence and maximum pain should be inflicted (Coleman 1990:46). The principle was that the status of the offended person must be restored. It stands to reason that the higher the status of the offended, the more intense the punishment and humiliation. When the perpetrator featured low on the hierarchical scale, not much symmetry remained in the application of the *talio* principle! Punishment was assigned, not only according to the act committed, but in particular according to the status of the person involved. Those who occupied the lower levels of Roman society were seen as disposable 'items' and any possible form of punishment was justified. Since reputation was at stake, mockery and ridicule of the

offender were part and parcel of the penal system (Coleman 1990:47) and this could happen either in individual instances or collectively in staged battles.

Torture should not be seen here as a form of punishment that was sometimes enacted in abnormal situations, but as punishment as such, and its repeated use developed it into a technology of punishment. Once the trial had ended and a person had been found guilty and the death sentence pronounced, the person suffered a complete loss of identity. Potter (1993:65) comments aptly that a convicted criminal became a slave of his or her penalty and belonged to that penalty. The objective was to inflict the maximum pain and total humiliation over an extended period, postponing death for as long as possible. Examples abound in the martyr stories. Although a certain measure of exaggeration is to be expected in the way these stories were told, the obviousness with which references are made to teams participating in torturing victims, as well as to sessions of torturing and different types of torturing are sufficient indication of how torture was developed into a specialised technology.[6]

There can be little doubt that the punitive practices of the Romans as they were enacted in the spectacle were highly engendered. The amphitheatre relegated women to the margins. Although indications exist that there were also female gladiators (Auguet 1994:169;[7] Hopkins 1983:23), the arena was masculine space.[8] From its origins as 'funeral games' to its development into Roman political and military theatre, its constituents comprised masculine values. It was public and competitive; it was meant to cultivate valour and promote courage; it celebrated the violence of war over peace and the strong over the weak (cf also Hopkins 1983:2–3). Since the arena was masculine space, women, condemned as criminals, were subjected to the most abhorrent practices. Being 'matter out of space' they were treated like 'dirt'!

Roman punitive practices concerned with women almost always exploited their sexuality. The focus on women as sexual objects could commence even during the period of the trial via threats to persuade them to cooperate. For example, since many early Christian women opted for celibacy, some of them were threatened during the trial with banishment to a brothel, thereby setting the *talio* principle in operation (cf *Mart Pot Basil* 2; *Mart Pion* 7.6). In the *Martyrdom of Agapê, Irenê and Chionê*, this threat was carried out and Irenê was placed in the public brothel (5.8; 6.2).

The torturing of the woman slave Blandina, in the *Martyrdom of Lyons*, may serve as an example of how punishment was engendered. Blandina was one of the group of early Christian martyrs who were tortured at

Lyons. One should keep in mind that as a woman slave she had no *dignitas* at all, and the worthlessness of her body is even reflected in the account of her martyrdom. We are told that Blandina's mistress agonised over possibly denying her faith, because of her 'bodily weakness' (*Mart Loug* 1.18) Although the account of her torture is hyperbolic, various aspects of a technology of punishment surface. The torturing is a drawn out process 'from dawn to dusk' (1.18). It continues for more than one day, because in the second report on her torture she is exposed to wild animals. She appears again on the final day of the gladiatorial games (1.53). Tortures consisted of various techniques[9] and incorporated a variety of agents.[10] After being scourged, thrown to animals and burned by a hot griddle, she was at last thrown into a net and exposed to a bull.

The introduction of a bull into the punishment of a woman was definitely gender related. Not only does it serve as a symbol for the brutal, violent aggression of the male, but it also served as a warning of what might happen when the social role of the male was threatened. At the same time it served to humiliate and mock the condemned woman by subjecting her to the world of animals. She was out of control to such an extent that she could not even control an animal! In the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla's feet were bound to two bulls and their genitals were then burned with red-hot irons in an attempt to rip her apart (*Act Paul Thecla* 35). Sexual innuendoes abound. Potter (1993:67) refers us to Clement, who 'mentions Christian women who were punished as Danaids and Dircae'. This also seems to be a reference to the punishment of Dirce who was bound to the horns of a bull and according to Potter this would 'have been absolutely in keeping with standard forms of punishment'.[11] Sexual innuendoes also emerge in the *Martyrdom of the holy Perpetua and Felicitas*, but in this case a mad cow was sent in and knocked them senseless. The author of this martyr story explained that a cow was chosen, so that 'their sex might match with that of the beast' (20.1). Their sexuality is again foregrounded when it is explicitly stated that they were 'stripped naked', and 'placed in nets', when the crowd became aware of the delicacy of one woman and the lactating breasts of the other (20.2–4).

Perhaps the most vivid, but simultaneously the most macabre and gruesome example of how techniques of torture were engendered, how women were reminded of their inferior social status, was the use of a bull in sexual intercourse. Exactly how this was established is difficult to imagine, but according to Coleman (1990:64) the secretion of a cow in season was rubbed onto the vagina of a woman bound to a stake.[12] That

this would completely have destroyed the woman was part of the plan, part of the technology of punishment.

It should be kept in mind that deliberate humiliation and mockery essentially constituted the process of torture. Early Christian aspirations of celibacy and virginity were turned around and viciously exploited. Female martyrs were usually stripped naked when they entered the amphitheatre, or were clothed in transparent, diaphanous nets to emphasise their sexuality (cf *Mart Perp Felic* 20.1). Nudity was not necessarily a form of dishonour in Antiquity, because an aristocratic woman would have thought nothing of walking naked in front of her slaves at home. However, it was a completely different issue when nakedness was displayed in full public view under the circumstances of punishment. Here the objective was to humiliate and dishonour.

No one dared challenge the power of the emperor's divine body, least of all women who were seen as having defective bodies. Besides gruesome tortures, reflecting their crime, and mocking them, special occasion had to be made for the torture of the female body. For that reason this was usually withheld until the end of the games; it was seen as a kind of culmination point, a climax to the activities of the amphitheatre.

3. *The Early Christian Investment of Power Relations on the Bodies of Female Martyrs*

3.1 Entextualising the Bodies of Female Martyrs

The mangled and mutilated bodies of martyred women were not left alone. Once death had relieved them of the indescribable pain they must have suffered, the Roman authorities were not the only powers that sought to fulfill their hunger. The early Christian communities also rushed to feed upon these bodies in what today can perhaps be described only as a perverse attempt at empowerment. A distinction should be made between what happened in the amphitheatre and what was constructed after that event (cf also Boyarin 1998:614). Having been killed in the amphitheatre did not in itself constitute martyrship - as a matter of fact, torturing and killing early Christians were seen by the Roman and Roman influenced communities as being brought on themselves by an arrogant, exclusivistic rejection of the social order. It was only after the event that martyrship was conferred upon the tortured bodies of early Christians.

Via the coining of 'martyrdom', the most debased, inhuman forms of cruelty and the exclusivistic fanaticism of self-destructing personalities were made into legitimate forms of power. It should be kept in mind that early Christians did not censure the violence and cruelty of the torture encountered in the spectacles, but used it for a variety of purposes, such as illustrations of the superiority of the early Christian body, showing how gendered 'limitations' could be transcended, encouraging others to emulate their struggle (cf Corrington Streete 1999:352), providing models of correct Christian behaviour (Potter 1993:54; Vierow 1999:606) and resisting opposing tendencies (Barnes 1984:522). These bodies were committed to the memory of the early Christian communities, who 'enlanguaged' and invested their relations of power on them.

Making the horrifying events of the spectacle into stories functioned as a strategy of empowerment for the early Christian communities. The coherency of story telling, its possibilities for identification and consolidation, its ability to create images and imitate visuality made it a useful agency for the construction of martyrdom, which in its turn lent credibility to the claims of early Christian superiority and exclusivism. Although many of the martyr stories appear to be a representation of the procedures followed during the trial and execution, they were appropriated by early Christian communities for consolidation and subversion. Potter (1993:64) indicates how the conditions that structured the trial, for example, could turn the tide against the authorities, confirming the character of the 'good man', a possibility the early Christians were well aware of. Cameron (1991:50–53) reminds us of the metaphorical, performative and declarative nature of early Christian discourse and in particular how it served to enact and symbolise Christian perfection through the martyr and his or her death. Boyarin (1998:604), quoting Castelli also refers to the manner in which early Christian discourse 'imaged' martyrdom, lending it a visuality and collapsing temporal restraints, which enabled audience participation and identification.

Making the wounds of the martyrs into words was not incidental, but a self-conscious act of the early Christians. Not only was there the precedent of Hellenistic biographies, not only was the performative effect of the martyr stories to provide models (cf Cameron 1991:57), but the act of writing embodied martyrdom to such an extent that the writings themselves were seen as having dynamic, salvific power. Ross (1995:327) indicates how Prudentius metaphorised the martyrs' bodies into the written text.[13] She writes:

> 'Prudentius revels in the corporeality of writing and redeems it by literally transforming it into an agent of bodily punishment and death capable of conferring salvation upon those who receive its marks. By transmuting martyrs into texts, Prudentius sanctifies writing, presenting it as divine discourse which is not just a shadow of the fullness of the spoken Word, but which retains its dynamism even if it is several times removed from its sacred source' (Ross 1995:329).

The text itself became infused with saving power so that those who read the text or listened to its reading could share in its liberating effect. She continues (Ross 1995:334):

> 'It is not enough that the martyrs' bodies bear redemptive wounds, since what is required is a participation in their suffering made possible by the transformation of their bodies into texts. To share actively in their martyrdom one must read the marks on their bodies before salvation can be conferred'.

Deprived of the wealth and power of the Roman imperial authorities, the propaganda of the written word could function in analogy to the propaganda of the monument or sculpture, while at the same time functioning to subvert it. Integrating the reading of these writings into the ritual act bestowed a power upon them that transcended space, time and the limitations of privacy.

It is against this background of a self-conscious empowerment that the entextualisation of the martyr's torture and death entailed that we need to consider the entextualisation of the female martyr's ordeal. Written from the perspectives of males, the early Christian martyr stories had no intention of empowering females; the sufferings of women were told neither to liberate them, nor of offering women of the church the possibility of fashioning an identity of the self nor supporting them in any manner. Making female martyrs served the political ends of emerging cults led by males in competition with their environment.

Early Christian sources depict a scenario where females were not excluded from torture and death in the amphitheatre. Although some of these martyr stories might have circulated among early Christian women and although some of the female martyrs might have developed into cult figures at a very early stage, males dominated in the stories. If the pre-Decian period is taken as a test case, martyr stories refer to fourteen female martyrs compared to thirty-four males.[14] Of the pre-Decian martyr stories, that is until 249 CE, none of the accounts refers only to women. This in itself is not problematic, because it could also be argued that only two of

the pre-Decian martyrstories refer exclusively to males. The problem is that when reference is made to the martyrship of females, their accounts are integrated into those of the males in such a manner as to either introduce the more important male story, or to function as added material (Cardman 1988:144).[15] The only pre-Decian martyr stories in which females play a dominant role are the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* (203 CE) and the *Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides* (205/6 CE). The former is the only martyr story of this period where only female names appear in its heading. To these can be added, albeit at a much later stage, the *Martyrdom of Agapê, Irenê and Chionê* (ca 304 CE) and the *Martyrdom of Crispina* (304 CE).[16] In the case of the *Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides*, Marcella, the mother of Potamiaena was also tortured and killed, but she is merely mentioned.

The prejudice of a male perspective has not gone unnoticed in contemporary scholarship and it has been used by some to argue that many more females were probably martyred. For example, Shaw (1993:13) writes:

> 'Given the various factors that clearly indicate to most historians that many more females than males were converting to Christianity in its first centuries, one would tend to expect them to be in the front line of persecution. Females may well have been martyred just as frequently as males in the sporadic fits of persecution that erupted in the various regions of the Roman empire, but their chances of being memorialized in literature was nowhere near as frequent. In fact, males were celebrated four times (or more) as frequently as females' .

Although Shaw may be quite correct that more females were tortured and killed than were 'memorialised', precisely the same could be said of males; he may also be quite correct in arguing that for females the 'chances' of memorialisation were less than for males, but that still does not provide a statistical conclusion shifting the balance in favour of more female martyrships. Shaw's argument is partially based partly on the historically equally invalid 'observation' that it was women in particular who flocked to early Christianity. This forms part of a constellation of arguments intended to secure more agency for women in the early Christian communities and seeks its substantiation in references to the role aristocratic women presumably played, once they had been converted to Christianity.

Although one may sympathise with the intentions and the argumentation, the problem is the way in which ancient sources are

treated by 'most historians'. Striving to provide some kind of objective statistical analysis, the rhetoric of ancient sources is not taken into consideration. Lieu (1998:12–13) indicates that although 'pagan writers' may speak of the attraction of Christianity to women, this should not be interpreted statistically because in many instances it serves to show the rational instability of women and their inclination towards superstition. For that reason, these same authors also refer to the manner in which certain religions attracted the uneducated masses and children. Celsus even refers to the attraction of 'thieves, burglars and poisoners', on which Lieu (1998:13) comments that 'few have argued that they too were represented in unusual numbers in the early church'![17]

Undoubtedly women would not play the same dominant role and would not appear as frequently as men when entextualisation took place from a male-prejudiced perspective. Including females in their stories and editorial activities does not yield evidence for statistical analysis, framed by contemporary affirmative political agendas; female martyr narratives were combined and integrated into male martyr stories from a male perspective with the objective of re-affirming the norms of ancient societies. The engendering of martyr stories confirmed the 'regulatory body'. The objective was to present a body that conformed to male interests; ironically, the female bodies that were reproduced conformed to the regulatory body of the Graeco-Roman world. Patricia-Cox Miller (1993:44) writes: 'When female sexuality is textualised by men, the bodies of women become a blank page and "its fearful power to articulate itself" is allowed only the channels of ephemeral virginity or pornographic carnality.' It would be possible to extend this into the realm of female martyrship because when the tortured bodies of the female martyrs were textualised another channel seemed to appear, namely the creation, or at least the approximation, of the ideal, regulatory, normative male body. The entextualisation of the tortured female body changed and transformed their bodies into the ideal body. This was true of tortured early Christian male bodies as well, but the rhetorical values of entextualising the female body resided in its difference in degree. Since the female body was regarded as an imperfect male body, the powerful capacity of Christianity could be confirmed when it offered the possibility for this innately weaker body to act in tandem with that of the male.

The entextualisation of female martyr stories therefore should not be interpreted as indications of more liberty or a greater independence for women over their own bodies; as a matter of fact, their bodies again served to empower and promote male interests.

3.2 'I am a Christian' — Confession and Continence

Whenever we speak of intense pain, we use the expression 'inexpressible pain' or indescribable pain. That is what the bodies of martyrs must have suffered. Bodies were scraped, ripped open, exposing the veins, pieces of human flesh were cut out, entrails were hanging out, flesh was burned and grilled with hot plates and irons. The pain these bodies must have endured was indeed inexpressible.

It is precisely this inexpressibility of pain that made it possible for the men who wrote about these bodies to use them as sites of political propaganda. Scarry (1985: 3–11, 12–14, 54–59) tells us that it is not only difficult to find words in which pain can be expressed, but also that pain drives words away. It has a totalising force that 'usurps the body, that demands that' the body pays attention only to the pain. The body is occupied or besieged by pain to such an extent, that language ability is reduced or regresses to the primal screams of a time before language. Bodily pain therefore reduces the possibility of language, but this reduction also opens up another possibility, namely that of its political use. The inability of those that suffered the real pain, that is, the real victims, offers a possibility to those who have not been part of the struggle to politicise the bodies of the victims to use them for their political interests and propaganda. A 'painful past' can become a handy mechanism for justifying and cultivating a more 'privileged present'.

Written by males, the stories of early Christian martyrs changed their bodies into suffering oracles. There is hardly a martyr story in which those who were martyred do not speak. Whatever pain they might have experienced, whatever type of torture was exerted, their bodies were made to speak. This may not necessarily have been during the period of torture, but the 'speaking' may have been be situated within the trial. But even during the process of torture itself intense pain apparently does not always reduce linguistic ability to a primordial scream. While Attalus, for example, was grilled in a brazen seat to such an extent that the spectators were confronted with the smell of burning human flesh, he was still able to taunt the crowd and defend Christianity (*Mart Loug* 1.52)! Although they were not always depicted speaking or even preaching during the process of torture, the confession of being a Christian in some way or another was given prominence. As a matter of fact, the reason for calling these victims *martyrs* did not stem from their suffering, from the real pain that their bodies encountered, but from their 'talking', the witness, the

testimony or the confession that they are Christians. Martyr comes from '*marturia*' and the primary reference for this is their confession of Christ.

Although according to these narratives these confessions usually occurred during the interrogation phase of the trial their function was not to provide with information or act as representative utterances. One should rather regard them in terms of the declarative speech act category, declarative. Just as the oath of the gladiator served to change his world, to make or create another world, the confession of the early Christians brought an alternative situation into existence. It functioned to create and form a new identity. 'I am a Christian' was the supposedly magical phrase that simultaneously and paradoxically demolished and constructed social hierarchical boundaries.[18] It was a proclamation, claiming superior manhood, and an aspiration to perfection, but at the same time it was the entry formula for voluntary self-destruction.[19] While it established inclusion in the domain of superiority, it simultaneously excluded from any level on the social hierarchy, making the person a 'social outcast'. Both males and females were portrayed as entering the circle of martyrs with this confession, just as it served as their death sentence.

It therefore appears that the identity of female and male martyrs was constructed in a similar manner during the process of entextualisation. However, this is not the case. The manner in which the 'speaking' of male and female martyrs was entextualised continued the engendered hierarchy of the Graeco-Roman world, where speaking, especially public speaking, belonged to the masculine world. Not only was 'the martyr' to conform to the regulatory body, but the regulatory body also dictated the tune — it was also the perspective from which the 'male' and the 'female' were perceived.

To speak in public was the prerogative of the male. It was seen to such an extent as a property of masculinity that we can turn it around: to be a male was to be an orator. It was an extremely important feature of masculinity, because it demonstrated sophistication, the wisdom that was seen to be peculiar to males. When one reads Quintilian's prescriptions on gesture and the voice, the body of the orator is to body forth masculinity. Quintilian (*Inst* 11.3.19) prescribes a 'physical robustness of the body', because this would prevent the voice having the 'shrillness that characterises the voices of eunuchs, women ...', and such robustness can be attained by 'exercise, oil rubbing and abstinence from sexual intercourse'. Typical female bodily qualities, such as moistness may affect the voice (11.3.21). The orator's voice must also be 'strong and enduring', not 'soft and sweet', which again means exercise (11.3.23–24). Especially

in the years of transition between boyhood and manhood the voice should not be overstrained, because during that period the voice is particularly weak on 'account of moisture', which then seems to be in 'superabundance' and the proof can readily be seen in the boy-man's swelling nostrils and breast (11.3.28–29). For pages on end Quintilian ensures that the aspiring orator does not show any signs of effeminacy.

So the males in the early Christian martyr stories talked, and they talked despite the 'inexpressibility' of pain; bodily pain disappeared as early Christian propagandists picked up the reports of martyrdom and used these bodies as canvases for political pictures. Cardman (1988) has indicated the extent to which communication between Roman officials, martyrs and the masses was permeated with 'old patterns'. She (1988:146) tells us that 'the greater range allowed to men's voices than to women's reflects an assumption about the propriety of public speech likely to have been shared by the prosecutors and the defendants, as well as by the authors of the acts.' In an ironical manner, friend and foe, early Christian male and Graeco-Roman male, participate in re-asserting the same value system.

When male martyrs were addressed by Roman officials it was usually with an acknowledgement of their status and reputation (Cardmann 1988:145). Yet when women feature in the hearings procedure, the engendered hierarchies of patriarchal Graeco-Roman society were constantly evoked, as reference is made to their instability, irrationality, and their recipient and passive status. Polycarp was portrayed as a man of influence in the vicinity of Smyrna. When it is announced in the arena that he had confessed to be a Christian, the entire mob of Jews and Gentiles confirmed that he was a teacher with remarkable influence (*Mart Pol* 12.2.27). However, Agathonikê in the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papylus and Agathonikê* is portrayed as a rather confused spectator and the only status assigned to her was that she was a 'certain Agathonikê' who threw herself upon the stake (*Mart Carp Pap Agath* [A] 42).[20] In version C of the *Martyrdom of Justin and his companions*, the 'given' gullibility and irrationality assigned to women are implied when it is hinted that she was probably deceived (*Mart Just* [C] 3.2; also Cardman 1988:146). One would have expected to hear the female voice in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* since part of this martyr story was possibly written by Perpetua herself (cf Shaw 1993:21).[21] Yet when Perpetua appears before the governor Hilarianus, it is her role within the household that is foregrounded, the threat which her actions pose to her role as daughter and mother.[22] In the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, the elder and his

companions, he is depicted as an 'apostolic man' (*Mart Pion* 1.2), and in the context of the hearing as a 'presbyter' and a 'teacher' (19.5–6). In addition the potential disruption his oratory powers may initiate is also confirmed (7.1). Sabina, on the other hand, is reprimanded for laughing (7.5) and when threatened reference is again made to her sexuality (7.6).[23] Her role is also consistently portrayed in terms of Pionius (cf 9.3; 10.3; 18.7) and then ... she simply disappears from the story.

In the case of males, the confession 'I am a Christian' was often framed with some kind of public speaking. According to Potter (1993:62) it was the trial phase in particular that provided a forum where the wisdom or moral superiority of the defendant could be demonstrated and could function as achieving an inversion of roles.[24] It was a moment that contained the possibility of empowerment in a rather powerless situation. The person about to be marginalised and thrown out of society was offered a final opportunity, a space, at the centre of public attention. Such was the possibility of empowerment that the Roman authorities sometimes deliberately avoided a public trial.[25] It was therefore a moment when the *bonus vir* could defend his honour, even though the outcome might still be execution.

When these stories were entextualised, this was when propaganda could be pushed to its limits. Confronted with the representatives of Roman power, this moment featured to justify the defiance of that power and the confirmation of a counter order. It provided the ideal setting for displaying the injustice of the ruling authorities and the pristine, pure innocence of early Christian leaders. Yet the 'old patterns' persisted; not only did the structure of many of the defence speeches assumed a structure that was completely compatible with the existing social order — the objective was to display the inconsistency of Roman authorities, but then an inconsistency *in the very terms* of Roman social order — but this opportunity for defence and justification, for 'speech-making', was assigned only to males. Early Christian martyr stories functioned as displaying the eloquency and courage of male early Christian leaders, while female martyrs had to be satisfied with a curt, direct response to questions put to them during the hearing. Their form of communication was restricted to the manner in which they submitted their bodies to voluntary torture and destruction. It is only in the case of the *Martyrdom of Crispina* that she was provided with the opportunity to engage in a more lengthy discussion with her judges (Cardman 1988:146).

It could be argued that the confession of being a Christian also served to express an additional transgression of the social order in the case of

the female martyr, because it usually entailed the destruction of household obligations.[26] In many of the martyr stories in which women play a role, female martyrdom comes about as a result of a refusal to maintain marital relations and fulfil the socially obligated burden of childbirth. In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* the problematisation of ancient social household obligations is particularly well and sympathetically illustrated in Perpetua's relationships with her father, her son and her brothers.[27] Felicitas, as slave, receives less attention, but even in her case it is mentioned that she has given birth to a girl and that 'one of the sisters brought her up as her own daughter' (*Mart Perp Felic* 15.7). It was not only the severance of the social bond between mother and child that was problematised, but also the relationship between wife and husband.[28] Refusal to have sex with a husband and then also refusing to grant a divorce might have been seen as an insult to the Roman law and definitely to the parents (Ide 1985:36).[29]

While it was definitely a transgression of social boundaries to resist ancient household obligations, especially after the domain of the household had been entered, it is doubtful whether this should be seen as a step in the direction of women laying claim to greater independence and more power over their own bodies (Ide 1985:56; Aspegeren 1990:107).[30] Not only should encouragement by male ecclesial leaders raise suspicion, but the entextualisation of the desire for celibacy and virginity should be read in the political context of early Christian male engendered patriarchalism. The motivation for celibacy and virginity did not stem from a desire to encourage female self-assertion or to construct a more independent female identity. It can be argued that early Christian female martyrship was an extreme, radical confirmation of the perfected *male* body. According to Graeco-Roman gender stereotyping, the female body was 'naturally' inclined to uncontrolled desire, whereas the male body possessed the capacity for self-control and moral balance. Being 'biologically' an imperfect version of the male, as the medical tradition brainwashed ancient society for centuries (cf Galen *Us Part* 14.6), the household functioned as a mechanism to domesticate woman's 'natural' uncontrolled and unbridled desires and behaviour. Voluntary female virginity in such a context did not mean the assertion of independence, but further destruction of identity, because it entailed aspiring to male notions of bodily perfection and control.[31] Where early Christian women resisted marital relations it was quite often depicted in their opposition to non-Christian males and in their obedience to an early Christian male leader. Non-Christian males, however, were

portrayed in gender terminologies that were usually used for women. Early Christian ecclesial propaganda offered female bodies the possibility of achieving perfect *man*hood and this could happen when women were obedient to their prescriptions! A popular strategy of persuasion was to discover in the shedding of femaleness (that is, in the loss of female identity) a return to the paradisiacal state and condition.[32] It was portrayed as a possible way of remedying Eve's 'transgression' and restoring Adamic virtue. Voluntary female martyrship, suicidal decisions, and death rather than loss of virginity should not be seen as expressions of an emerging development of female identity, but should rather be seen as forms of the macabre extremes of violence that religious persuasion may lead people to.

3.3 The Making of Suffering Heroes

A more radical form of transformation occurs when the female martyr's body is entextualised by terminologies from the world of gladiators and athletes.

On the one hand the gladiator was seen as a man without any value, the scum of the community. Barton (1989:2) describes him as: 'crude, loathsome, doomed, lost'; it was a man utterly debased by fortune, a slave, a man altogether without worth and dignity ... almost without humanity'. On the other hand, the gladiator was seen as the culmination of aggressive, violent, physical male behaviour. Initially the pool of gladiators was filled only by condemned criminals and conquered prisoners of war, but as the period of the Republic was drawing to a close, more than half of the gladiators were volunteers (1989:2, 25).

Despite the qualities of indignity and offensiveness the gladiator must have had, it provided with a technology of the body that could function as a mechanism for empowerment. All gladiators were subjected to a particular oath *(sacramentum gladiatorum)*; but this oath functioned as a declarative — it changed the situation of the gladiator. It immediately transformed his status — from a position of indignity and desperation it offered the possibility of restored glory and honour, a position and status of *dignitas*. By virtue of this oath, the dishonour associated with being in the service of someone, of being bound, of existing on the lower echelons of power, subjected to beatings and death by the sword could be changed into honour. Taking this oath meant operating under the obligation of self-destruction, but it was a controlled, voluntary self-destruction. It was

a commitment to death, but then an honourable death. Although the gladiator had to be absolutely obedient to the person who possessed him and although being a possession meant not being in control of oneself, that is, occupying the role of a slave and a woman, taking this oath restored that control. The same body on which the community had made its marks of dishonour and shame, could become a space where dignity could be restored.

'Voluntariness' played a key role in the model of the gladiator. The possibility of volition was not open to those on the lower levels of the social hierarchies and this had serious consequences when measured against the regulatory masculine body, because the *potestas*, the power of the male body, was driven by the right to 'will'. For that reason, the gladiator had to be infused with an *amor mortis*, an embrace of death; honour consisted in knowing that pain will have to be endured, that death will follow, but nevertheless to rush to it unafraid. A technology of the body developed that made the way in which one died and the manner in which one endured pain into a virtue. Via voluntary self-destruction, self-empowerment followed. The voluntariness catapulted the gladiator into the role of a *miles sacratus*, a kind of sacrificial offering, and it epitomised the ideal of the brave man. This was the extreme form of service to the public (Barton 1994:52).

This heroic role of the gladiator developed during the imperial period in particular. According to Barton (1989) the absolute power of the emperor reduced the aristocratic citizen to an obedient, knee-bending follower, a flatterer of the principate. Despite being freeborn, aristocrats were bound to the whims of the emperor. Barton (1989:11) writes: 'The traditional testimonials of power, freedom and pride began to signal *as well* powerlessness, enslavement and humiliation.' The gladiator who voluntarily approached the arena and certain pain and death with an unflinching eye, represented a model of courageous, heroic masculinity with which the spectators in the arena could identify.

Another component in the structure of the gladiatorial model was the notion of 'endurance' *(patientia)*. Endurance, strictly speaking, belonged to the world of the female, because it was a virtue associated with passivity and more specifically with giving birth and the pain that had to be endured during this process. Even though this was hailed as a female virtue, what provided it with status was the male component, because 'endurance' suggested a measure of self-control, which was not a distinctive feature of the female body. Yet, the bodies of males were not

usually associated with the passivity of lying down and surrendering one's body to something that had to be endured. Their bodies were modelled on standing erect, inflicting pain and dying on the battlefield; female bodies were seen as suffering bodies, lying prone, giving birth in bed (Shaw 1996:285). However, this mainly female virtue changed within the context of the arena. Within this male-dominated context, the component of self-control was actualised and 'endurance' was infused with positive value. In this vein, it became possible for Seneca to differentiate between 'endurance', as a secondary virtue of women, and 'courageous endurance', which was associated with athletes and those that were politically tortured (1996:295). Instead of being a passive category, it was changed to active mode.

Numerous examples can be found of the identification of early Christian martyrs with the model of the gladiator. It stands to reason that the context of the spectacle was not something that would be favourably evaluated by early Christian authors. Yet, even though they might polemicise against the spectacle, owing to its embeddedness in Graeco-Roman sacral culture, they would use the models of the athletes and the gladiators to clarify the role and status of the martyrs (Tertullian, *Mart* 1 and *Spect* 21–23). The model of the gladiator became a strategy of empowerment for the humiliated and denigrated bodies of the early Christians. Just as the gladiator had an oath to take, the martyr changed his or her situation of indignity into dignity by confession; in both cases it changed the situation; just as the gladiator went to death voluntarily, the martyr rushed to meet his or her saviour; just as the gladiator endured pain and suffering, the quality of the martyr was measured by the ability to endure. For that reason they are associated with being 'noble' (*Mart Pol* 2.1.2; 3.1,2), they are seen as superior (*Mart Pol* 2.2, 3,4; 3.1; 13.3, 19.2); they are portrayed as having a contempt for death (2.3) and Germanicus even violently forces the beast upon himself. They do not need to be tied to a stake, because they are portrayed as being erect (13.3). It is interesting to note the constant references to Polycarp's successful role as citizen.

Female martyrs were also drawn into the empowering sphere of the gladiator model. We are told that Potamiaena 'endured' her suffering 'nobly' to the end. 'Boiling pitch was slowly poured drop by drop over different parts of her body, from her toes to the top of her head. Such was the struggle that this magnificent young woman endured' (*Mart Pot Basil* 4). Blandina, the slave woman, first tired out all her torturers and we are told that 'this blessed woman like a noble athlete got renewed

strength with her confession of faith' (*Mart Loug* 1.18), and she is included when the author states: 'Surely it behoves these noble athletes, after sustaining a brilliant contest and glorious victory, to win the great crown of immortality' (1.36). And then it is explicitly stated that a 'day of gladiatorial games was expressly arranged for our sake'(1.37). On the last day of these gladiatorial games Blandina was again brought forward to be tortured and then it is indicated that after she 'nobly endured' every torment, she died (1.54). In the *Martyrdom of Irenê, Agapê and Chionê,* all showed their willingness to die in the responses given to the judge and Irene threw herself on the fire to be burned alive. In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* references to the spectacle and her role as contestant abound. In her first vision she had to climb a ladder whose sides were lined with all the weapons and equipment to be found in the arena (*Perp Felic* 4.3); they thought that they would have to fight animals in the games, celebrating the birthday of the emperor Geta (7.9). In her fourth vision gladiatorial ceremony was enacted as she dreamed of being led into the arena (as usually happened with the gladiators). Here she was confronted by an Egyptian whom she had to fight, and whom she also finally overpowered and was accordingly bestowed with the honour of victory (10.5–15). To a lesser extent, but still in contest with and context of the gladiator, Felicitas is also incorporated in the contest and quite symbolically it is stated that she 'could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism' (18.3). And when Perpetua died, it was in the manner in which gladiators were taught to die, only 'she took the hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat' (21.9) thereby suggesting her voluntariness in choosing her own type of death.

Why was the gladiatorial model used to portray the enduring capabilities of female martyrs? Why not use the extraordinary pains women of the ancient world must have suffered in giving birth as model? What were the forms of 'achievement-under-duress' available to those who depicted women in Graeco-Roman society? Although it would probably be not too far off the mark to find such a form of achievement in women's daily existence within patriarchal society itself, there were probably not too many possibilities that were publicly acknowledged, and it could be argued that these restricted possibilities compelled the use of the gladiatorial model. However, why choose a model representing the epitome of virile, brutal masculinity? Why this radical transgression of gender boundaries?

If we take into consideration that the 'regulatory body' was a masculine

body, that structured gender and reputational relations via agencies that were often to a large extent only in the hands of males, the issue was not simply one of transgression but of transformation. The gladiatorial model did not simply allow female martyrs entry into the world of males, but it *changed* them into males. The imperfection of the female body was entrenched to such an extent by a single-sex regulatory body that it had to be transformed into a male body. For at least some of our early Christian male authors, honour and nobility were qualities so intimately associated with masculinity that only 'maleness' could exhibit them. As such, the female body had to be 'unmade', had to suffer a loss of identity *again*.

In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, Perpetua was stripped of her clothes and then it is stated, 'and suddenly I was a man' (10.7).[33] With this formulation, expression was given to a motive that was quite widespread 'in the early Christian communities — the female must become male', the female must conform to the perfection of the male body. For that reason it is often stated of female martyrs that they have left their homes, their children, their families. Although Perpetua was initially permitted to keep her baby with her in the prison, eventually she was satisfied that the baby should remain with her father after she had fulfilled her role in nurturing. Felicitas' baby girl was given to one of the sisters. Despite the repeated attempts to force Perpetua to sacrifice, she rejected family and willingly opted for martyrdom. Home and sexuality, properties that constituted womanhood according to the 'regulatory body', had to be left behind, because these did not constitute manhood.

The stories of the female martyrs therefore resurrected their tortured bodies, but served to entrench and reproduce the regulatory, male body. They did not necessarily encourage martyrdom, but identification with these stories would have meant subscribing to the perfection of the male body — it would have meant accepting the model of masculinity. In a well-written, thought-provoking publication Perkins (1995) has demonstrated how suffering was made visible by early Christianity (cf :7–8; 230), how it provided a niche in a cultural discourse that did not provide a terminological set for the powerless and those that suffered. She argued that it served to fashion the 'self' of early Christians and provided them with a particular identity, namely the 'self' as sufferer (:32). However, it is problematic to find in the martyr discourses the same type of empowerment for male and female that Perkins' discussion of Perpetua and Felicitas reflects (:105–111). Irrespective of whether the hand of a female author can be traced to certain sections of this martyr story, for

male and female the regulatory body was that of the perfect male. Although the main character of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a female, her body is ironically used to enforce patriarchalism—her virtue is found in her transformation into a male. Surely, this cannot be 'a self-representation of a woman subverting and transcending her society's strictures, buttressed by a growing sense of empowerment through suffering' (:105). Instead of a restoration of identity, the integration of the female martyr into the martyr genre tortured her body again ... and once again the result was a loss of identity.

4. Conclusion

It is dramatically ironic that the 'spectacle' that served to invest the power relations of the Roman Empire on to the bodies of the early Christian martyrs simultaneously became the site that offered a possibility for a restoration of their status. Bowersock (1995:50) tells us that 'in the manner of their dying their fame was far closer to that of the great athletes and gladiators.' Situated in the cities, erected for the entertainment of the public and well attended by the public the spectacle shifted the bodies of the martyrs into the public eye, unwittingly providing the possibility of resistance. Their mangled, mutiliated and destroyed bodies became bodies of perfection as they were linked with the epitome of the aggressive, conquering, violent male body of the gladiator.

But while an attempt was made to elevate the bodies of criminals to those of heroes by demonstrating how they adhered to the regulatory body, how perfect they were, the bodies of the female martyrs had to suffer a second indignity as they had to become male. Their female bodies were not good enough, despite their extreme suffering; they were innately and inherently so weak, so incomplete, so insufficient that their bodies had to be changed, and changed into the body of the oppressor. So exclusionary were the various levels of ancient gendered hierarchy that there was no possibility of entering the domain of a male except through an essential change. Even though that body has been subjected to humiliation and suffering, sometimes exceeding the tortured bodies of males, it was still not good enough, but had to be transformed by a male hand in order to function in the outreach of the early Christian community.

There is no way that we can speak of an equality of sexes in the first few centuries of early Christianity; to do that would be to deny the

continued suffering of females and again render them powerless. Cardman (1988:150) formulates this aptly: 'For women especially, the making of a martyr meant the unmaking of the body — her own, as well as her world's.'

We began by referring to Tertullian and maybe we should close by referring to him again. One would have thought that the contributions by early Christian females, especially female martyrs, would have secured them inclusion in writings about females in the canon, and would have supported their desire to play a greater role in the leadership of the early communities. Yet Tertullian had the following to say about the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, which was gaining influence in North Africa. The concern is whether women can be allowed to baptise:

> But the woman of pertness, who has usurped the power to teach, will of course not give birth for herself likewise to a right of baptizing, unless some new beast shall arise like the former [new beast is woman]; so that, just as the one abolished baptism, so some other should in her own right confer it! But if the writings which wrongly go under Paul's name claim Thecla's example as a licence for women's teaching and baptizing, let them know that in Asia the presbyter who composed that writing, as if he were augmenting Paul's fame from his own store, after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office. For how credible would it seem that he who has not permitted a woman even to learn with overboldness should give a female the power of teaching and baptizing! 'Let them be silent,' he says, 'and at home consult their husbands.' (*De Baptismo* 17)

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[1] I hereby acknowledge the financial assistance of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion.

[2] *Discutienda sunt enim deliciae, quarum mollitia et fluxu fidei virtus effeminari potest. Deliciae* may be translated as 'allurements, charms, delights, fancies', all aspects relating directly to the engendered value-system of the Graeco-Roman world; *mollitia* can again be translated as 'softness, flexibility, pliancy' and then in a negative sense as 'weakness' and 'effeminacy'; *fluxus* refers to a flowing, but flowing, liquidity, moisture were specific and distinctive features of the effeminate. However, the very obvious clincher that Tertullian is here operating from a hierarchical engendered value system lies in the *effeminari*

potest — the virtue of faith can be made effeminate via (stereo) typical female associative values such as softness and moisture.

[8] *Ceterum, nescio an manus, spatalio circumdari solita, in duritiam catenae stupescere sustineat; nescio an crus, periscelio laetatum, in nervum se patiatur artari; timeo cervicem, ne margaritarum et smaragdorum laqueis occupata locum spathae non det* (Tertullian, *Cult fem* 2.13.11–16.)

[4] It would obviously be possible to point to examples where this rigid, dichotomous engendered hierarchy did not apply, were smoothed over, or were simply more flexible. However, centuries of using several mechanisms propagating and enforcing these views in the ancient Mediterranean world must have created a social script or index rendering certain ways of putting bodies into discourse as 'natural'.

[5] Even the space where it was originally held was suggestive of how central to the heart of the social body these events were. Hopkins (1983:5) indicates that it was usually held in the forum.

[6] Cf in the *Martyrdom of the holy Carpus, Papylus and Agathonikês* (the Greek recension) Carpus was scraped over a long period of time (.23) and Papylus endured three pairs of scrapers (.35). It was only after this that they were burnt alive. In the Latin recension Carpus is hung up and scraped (2.4). In the Martyrdom of Lyons, the sessions of torture never appear to stop. In the narrative, even the event of the trial is preceded by torturing, albeit more of a mob-rage (1.7). Very explicitly the audience of this story was told that torturers, 'were taking turns' and 'in every way from dawn to dusk (1.18) tortured Blandina, the female slave. This happened to be only one session of torture, because after the gladiatorial combat she was again tortured and taken down to be tortured yet again (cf 1.41,42).

[7] Cf also the epigraphic image of Amazona and Achillia in combat in Auguet, fig 21; also in Ewigleben, fig 137.

[8] Ewigleben refers to Domitian who presumably made women fight by torchlight, and an event held by Nero where only Ethiopians, women and children appeared, and Petronius' discussion of a woman charioteer (2000:125–126). However, that Septimius Severus banned appearances by women in 200 CE (Ewigleben 2000:27) should be an indication that it indeed happened.

[9] It is stated that many types of torture were applied, although even one could have killed her.

[10] Although the torturers were taking turns, they were exhausted (1.18).

[11] Cf also Potter (1993:85), where he points to a variation on this type of punishment. In this case the woman is riding on the bull with hands behind her back as a lion or panther leaps upon her.

[12] For further examples of the occurrence of bestiality, cf also Potter (1993:85), although some of the examples he refers to do not pertain to the area of the arena.

[13] Ross's concern is specifically with the *Peristephanon liber* of Prudentius.

[14] Martyr stories that can be seen as pre-Decian are the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Acts of Carpus, Papylus and Agathonikê*, the *Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus*

and Lucius, the *Martyrdom of Justin, Chariton, Charito, Evelpistus, Hierax, Paeon, Liberian and their community*, *The Martyrdom of those in Lyons*, the *Martyrdom of the Scillitan martyrs*, the *Martyrdom of the holy and blessed Apollonius*, the *Passion of the holy Perpetua and Felicitas*, the *Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides*. For problems concerning the *Martyrdom of Pionius* the presbyter and those with him as pre-Decian, see Musurillo 1972:xxix. For discussions on pre-Decian martyrships as such, see Barnes 1984:509–531, although objectivistic tendencies pervade his approach.

[15] Cardman's (1988:144) reference constitutes a broader scope than only the pre-Decian martyrstories; she refers martyr accounts from the second to the fourth centuries.

[16] In the case of the *Martyrdom of Crispina*, the named, female companions Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda, were subjected to torture before her, since two manuscripts from the monastery of St Theodoric refer to these women (Musurillo 1972:xliv, 303).

[17] For a statistical analysis of epigraphical material from 284–423 CE to determine the number of women who converted to Christianity and who could have influenced aristocracy see Salzman (1989). The conclusion is here also reached that claims on the uniform expansion of early Christianity and the influential role of aristocratic women in the spreading of early Christianity should be regarded with suspicion

[18] This transgression of social boundaries which the confession brought about can be seen in Sanctus' insistence to respond only with the confession 'I am a Christian'. This confession functions as resistance to the mentioning of his name, race, city or 'whether he was a slave or a freedman' (*Mart Lougd* 20.5–10).

[19] On the manner in which this served the development of the notion 'confession' for the penitent in the church, see Foucault 1988:41–49.

[20] What is here described is her portrayal in the Greek version which appears to be the older version. The hierarchy of gender has however not disappeared in the Latin version, because here the suspicion from the perspective of the proconsul is that she is following the decision of her teachers. The assumption is that a woman did not have a mind of her own, but had to be controlled by someone (*Mart Carp Pap Agath [Lat.]* 6).

[21] The part concerned is sections 3–10.

[22] Hilarianus attempts to persuade her by reminding her of her father's age and the future of her baby boy (*Mart Perp Felic* 6.4). In both cases the honour versus shame social axis is implied.

[23] Sabina is threatened to be put in a brothel (7.6).

[24] He argues that there was actually a general tendency to restrain the desire for martyrdom which could lead to a public display and have an adverse effect on the public (1985:62). The problem was the final ennoblement of the defendant.

[25] For an example of this type of 'behind-the-scenes' deliberations see the *Martyrdom of Pionius and his companions* (*Mart Pion* 7.1).

[26] Ide (1985:9) quite convincingly argues that the reasons for prosecution

should not be restricted to the confession only, but should be seen in terms of its wider political ramifications. He refers, for example, to the manner in which women functioned as caretakers of the gardens for Olympian deities. Since 'being a christian' meant being without the gods, early Christian women recused them from this role (:14).

[27] See especially *Mart Perp Felic* 2.2, 3.8–9, 5.3–5, 6.2–3, 8; 15.5,7.

[28] Cf the *Acts of Andrew* in which case traces of a reversal of gender relations can be detected. Stratocles portrays a rather 'wimpish' character and Aegeates appears to be crude, rude and uncontrollable. Whether this justifies Bremmer's conclusion that 'educated, wealthy women were an important part of the *Acts of Andrew's* intended readership' (2000:24) is methodologically problematic.

[29] See for example the *Acts of Paul and Thecla,* where Thecla's mother participates in bringing her daughter to 'justice' for refusing to enter into marriage.

[30] The point of the argument is not to deny the violence ancient household patterns enforced and that its rejection could have meant a relief; the problem is whether rejection of marriage and procreation can indeed be seen as forms of self-expression and identity formation for females in a 'one-sex model' context, where the re-structuring took place by males in competition with other males.

[31] Confession as a means to overcome this innate bodily weakness can be seen in the example of Blandina, the martyred, female slave where ancient contemporary assumptions on the 'weak' female body abound (*Mart Loug* 1.18).

[32] See for example Blandina's ordeal which 'would make irreversible the condemnation of the crooked serpent' (*Mart Loug* 1.42); cf also Aspegeren 1990:122.

[33] Perhaps a better translation of the stylised Latin, *'et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus'*, would be: 'I was smoothed over, and I was made ... a man', stripping being implied as condition for the oiling of the body.

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